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ABSTRACT

New educational programs are attempting to meet the needs of male African American students. The new programs vary widely in approach, scope, content, and targeted age group. However, they all focus on helping African American male youth develop productive behaviors and values by bringing them into contact with African American male adults. The following components are common to most programs: (1) appropriate male models/male bonding; (2) identity/self-esteem; (3) academic values and skills; (4) parent and community strengthening; (5) transition to manhood; and (6) a safe haven. Of all the program components, those programs that have experimented with all-African, all-male classes have been the most controversial. While early evaluations indicate some success, it is too early to determine the long-term effectiveness of these programs and approaches. African American males have been called "an endangered species" and these new programs are an important attempt to help this group function productively. A list of eight references is appended. (FMW)

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SCHOOL PROGRAMS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

Breaking the Cycle: School-Based Programs

Educators know all too well that they alone cannot solve the social and economic problems in the U.S. that so severely limit opportunities of African American males. Nonetheless, many educators and other concerned citizens are introducing new practices targeted specifically to their unique needs. Efforts are also being made to decrease the suspension and expulsion rates of black males, to lower their representation in general tracks and special education programs and raise it in programs for the gifted and talented, and to improve the recruitment and training of teachers and counselors in predominantly black schools (Gibbs, 1988; Reed, 1988).

Program Variations

The new programs for African American male students vary widely. While some are school-based, others are only school-linked. While some are full-day programs, others are only classes. Some programs are for male students only; some are not. Some programs are for African Americans only; others are offered to all students, as a magnet school specializing in computer technology would be. Some programs attempt to transform the entire academic curriculum with an Afrocentric perspective—again, like a computer magnet—while others simply add a component on African American history and/or culture. Even the meaning of an Afrocentric or African American curriculum is enormously varied. The teacher of choice would be an African American male, but this group is in extremely short supply in every school system; therefore, some classes are taught by white males, others by women, and most programs, regardless of the teacher's race and sex, bring in African American men as speakers, mentors, and so on.

The special school programs also vary in their targeted age group. Based on evidence that African American males begin to slide academically some time before the third or fourth grade (Kunjufu, 1984; Lloyd, 1978), many are aimed at boys in the early elementary years. Other programs respond to evidence that adolescence for all races is a particularly precarious period; adolescent risk-taking behavior too often results in early fathering, drug use, dropping out of school, acts of violence, and incarceration. They help develop alternative behaviors, values, and activities, and offer youth new role models by bringing them into contact with African American male adults.

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Multicultural vs. Afrocentric Curriculum

To help clarify the contributions of these programs, it is useful to compare them to multicultural programs, which are quite common around the country, as a concept, if not in fact. Multicultural programs aim to rectify the narrowness of a Eurocentric curricula and to reduce intergroup conflict by infusing an awareness of diversity. By contrast, an Afrocentric curriculum also aims to include a people and history that is often left out of the traditional curriculum. In any case, the simultaneous use in the emerging programs for African American males of both Afrocentric materials and activities to support development of a male identity is new for any group.

Rationale for Program Components

Although the effect of these programs is intended to be greater than the sum of its parts, it is useful to consider the rationale of the various program components.

Appropriate Male Models/Male Bonding. The first assumption is that African American male students suffer from a lack of appropriate male models in their neighborhoods, at home, and in the school; and that they have few steady African American men with whom to bond. Most teachers are women. At the same time, "black children are surrounded by an over abundance of negative images of black men" (Prince, 1990, p. 3). Thus, the programs offer positive images of African American male adulthood through African American male teachers, mentors, advocates, and other role models, in an all-male classroom.

Identity/Self-Esteem. A second assumption is that the self-esteem of African American male students in inner-city neighborhoods is battered by the pervasive negative images of blacks—on the streets, in schools, and in the media. Thus, the programs attempt a kind of consciousness-raising, by teaching the bi-continental history of African Americans and making clear the achievements and contributions of blacks in both Africa and America. Also, because negative media images can cause teachers to doubt their African American male students' chances for success, program teachers need to be carefully selected and trained.

Academic Values and Skills. Because the values and discipline necessary for achievement are absent in much of ghetto life, the programs attempt to combat the "fear of acting white" that hinders school achievement, and to develop an alternative system of African American values and social skills that will facilitate success. For example, they mandate strict attendance, provide assistance with schoolwork, help students develop nonviolent conflict resolution skills, and promote responsible sexual norms.

Parent and Community Strengthening. The programs are often directed particularly to African American males from fragmented and stressed families. They assume that these boys and youth must learn responsibility to their homes and communities, at the same time as parents and community members must be brought in to help in the development. Thus

many programs have a community service component, try to bring community members into the classroom as mentors and in other roles, and demand that parents commit themselves to some form of participation.

Transition to Manhood. The assumption is that fatherless homes may engender particularly difficult transitions from boyhood to manhood, and that many adolescents who are having difficulty moving toward manhood participate in gangs as a spontaneous form of initiation rite. Possibly the most innovative aspect of these programs, therefore, is the use of formal "initiation rites" to direct and dignify the transition to manhood. These initiation rites programs generally cover a year, and often include acquiring new knowledge and following rules of conduct, keeping a journal, creating a genealogical chart of the boy's family, providing community service, and, finally, participating in a special ceremony (Hare & Hare, 1985; Hill, 1987). Instruction for initiation rites is often through packaged programs and from private sector consultants.

A Safe Haven. Finally, and underlying all other components, is the conviction that many low-income African American males need an environment that shelters them from, and is a positive alternative to, their subcultures. Thus the programs often protect students from the street by extending the school day and adding a Saturday component.

Some Cautions

Of all the program components, the prospect of all-African American, all-male classrooms has been most controversial. Although *de facto* race segregated schools and classes are commonplace in every city, the creation of race- and gender-segregated schools or classes violates existing civil rights statutes. For this reason, a number of programs have modified their single-sex, single-race enrollment criteria.

In addition, a number of arguments have been raised against all-African American, all-male classes. Some educators worry that these programs deflect energy from the general urgency of educational improvement, and that allowing programs that segregate by choice will legitimate all-white classes that teach white supremacy (NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 1991). Moreover, special programs for African American males have been said to exacerbate tensions between black men and women, and even foster a kind of black woman bashing. Some fear that special all-male programs may reinforce outdated authoritarian male values. Finally, African American girls are said to need an Afrocentric curriculum, male teachers, and other such enhancements as much as their brothers.

Conclusion

African American males have been called "an endangered species." Because it is important for every American group to be able to function productively, the problems of African American males must be a concern of all Americans. Therefore, new programs for African American males are being opened monthly. While early evidence suggests some success, it is too early to know the long-term efficacy of these programs and approaches. Moreover, because most programs involve several simultaneous interventions, it will not be easy to determine which components are most effective.

— Carol Ascher

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The comprehensive monograph on which this digest is based, *School Programs for African American Male Students*, by Carol Ascher, is available for $5 from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education. In addition to providing an expanded discussion of the issues capsulized here, it includes descriptions of 17 programs around the country, and a comprehensive bibliography.

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